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## Friendship blooms between inmates and volunteers with prison garden program

### Photos



Adam Zewe

Billie Dickerson pulls weeds from a bed at the Baylor Women's Correctional Institution vegetable garden.

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By Adam Zewe  
Community News

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New Castle, Del. — Marianne Saxton crouches on the edge of a rectangular planting bed, delicately plucking a few stray shoots of lamb's quarter from a patch of young lettuce plants. She stretches a gloved hand out over the soggy, black dirt and snaps the bright, green shoots with a squeeze of her fingers.

But the unwavering coil of barbed wire 10 feet above her head is a somber reminder that this is no backyard vegetable patch. Saxton is a prisoner, serving a three-year sentence in the Baylor Women's Correctional Institution in New Castle, and the garden she tends is a part of the prison's culinary program.

"Working outside brings the best out in me. It's something for the spirit," she said. "When I'm out here, I'm not in prison."

Saxton is one of 22 women in the culinary program, which includes a gardening component where the prisoners grow vegetables from seeds to use in their kitchen classroom at Baylor.

The seeds and much of the gardening equipment are provided by the Delaware Center for Horticulture and a group of dedicated volunteers from the Garden Club of Wilmington help Culinary Art Instructor Rose Finocchiaro teach prisoners the principles of gardening.

Garden club volunteer Mary Patterson of Rockland visits the prison almost every week to help with the Wednesday morning class.

"I like the idea that we might have an impact on these women who have gotten themselves into a mess," she said. "You can get to know people really differently when you're all down there working on some project together, or just digging in the dirt."

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And while the chain-link fences and security gates of Baylor are a far cry from the stone walls and wrought iron entryways of Rockland, Patterson said the prisoners and volunteers become fast friends.

Teaching the prisoners is a joy because many have only ever experienced vegetables at a supermarket, she said, and it is fun to see them fascinated by seeds and shoots that eventually wind up in a salad.

The vegetables are used for everything from salsa to pickles, said Finocchiaro, and the inmates do a fair amount of catering for prison events, like the dedication ceremony for Baylor's new multi-purpose room in December. The women learn the entire process, she said, from pricing the job to ladling the soup.

Combining culinary arts lessons with gardening skills provides ob training that could help the women find work and a better life when they leave behind the walls of Baylor.

"Even if it's just a stepping stone, it's a start," she said.

Lisa Downes, who has been at Baylor nearly three years for drug trafficking and gun charges, said she could use the skills she's learned when she is released. But it's hard to focus on the future when she's locked in cell, she said, especially since being away from her family has made her prison sentence a lonely experience. For Downes, the garden is a comfort.

"We're around so much negativity. We're always locked down somewhere," she said. "Just to get outside and feel the air, it gives us hope."

It's striking how happy the prisoners are when they work in the garden, laughing and joking as they till the soil or tend the plants, said garden club volunteer Carroll Eaton, of Wawaset Park.

The prisoners build self esteem and learn that they have many talents they never even knew about, said Eaton. And teaching them is rewarding because of how appreciative they are, she said, but the education is not limited solely to the inmates.

"I've learned that I can do things that I never thought I could do or would ever do," she said. She is so comfortable working with the prisoners, that she never hesitates to dive into the dirt.

Educating others is rewarding, she said, as has been watching the garden grow from a few raised beds to a 30- by 80-foot vegetable patch.

Finocchiaro plans to keep expanding the program. The prisoners are working on a cookbook of recipes they have cooked in class and are making and selling flower arrangements to pay for the cost of printing it, she said. The inmates are also making the centerpieces for the Delaware Center for Horticulture's Rare Plant Auction, she said.

Eventually, Finocchiaro said she would like to set up a stand where they could sell the prisoners' produce, using the money to expand the garden and teach more skills, like landscaping techniques.

The garden already teaches inmates much more than job skills, said Anne Ware, who is serving an 18-month sentence for driving under the influence. The most important lesson she has learned from tending the plants has been to never take life for granted.

Glancing at the walls of Baylor looming in the distance, Ware admits she has made mistakes in her life, but just like the garden's green shoots pushing their way toward the sunlight, she is ready for a brighter future.

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